

## Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, some days can be very difficult and we need the touch of Your loving hand to help us and guide us through our troubles. Other days are easier for us, and You empower us to rise to greater heights and do great things for You. Whatever happens today, may we retain our focus on You, and on your love for us and compassion for all. May everything we do this day bring glory to Your Kingdom. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

Use the Internet to find the 'Apostles Creed'. Make a copy of it and use it during the day to confess your faith.

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian speakers.** There are many ways to proclaim the Gospel, but ask the Lord whether you must be willing to stand before others and declare the Word of God.
- Give thanks to God for those who have nurtured you in faith
- Pray about waste, and attitudes towards this in your country

## Meditation

Holy Spirit, come upon us afresh today;

Help our eyes see what is good  
Where people mostly see gloom

Strengthen our hearts to be courageous  
Where people fear to tread

Extend the sensitivity of our hearing  
Where people prefer not to hear

Grow within us the art of sensitivity  
Where people would rather not to know

Enable our spirits to be responsive  
Where people frequently fail to react

Inspire us with the beauty of love  
Where people have stifled passion

Holy Spirit, do the impossible in us today!

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## Bible passage – Exodus 20:7-12

<sup>7</sup> You shall not make use of the name of the LORD your God for no good reason, for the LORD will not hold innocent anyone who uses His name in vain.

<sup>8</sup> Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> You shall labour and do all your work for six days; <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work, you, your son or your daughter, your male or female servant, your cattle, or the stranger living within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them; but He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

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# Bible Study

## Review

Today, we look at the third, fourth and fifth of the Ten Commandments. These three follow on logically from the first two, and are extraordinarily important. For if the Lord is God, His name should not be used casually, or *'for no good reason'*, He is to be respected properly as the One and only God (20:7). God's people are also told to behave like their God, who rested on the seventh day after made the world; they should keep the 'Sabbath' (20:8f.). Lastly, God's people are told to honour their parents, and therefore respect the command to Adam and Eve, to *'be fruitful and increase in number ...'* (Gen 1:28). All these commands call for respect for God; one of them is cast in the negative *'you shall not ...'* (20:7), and two are cast in the positive (20:8,12), and they all have considerable implications for today.

The third commandment is commonly remembered as this *'you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.'* (see NIV), and as a command not to swear using God's name. This, however, is not what the text says. In truth, it forbids making a mockery of God's name when swearing, but today, 'swearing' means something different than what is meant here. In ancient times, people made oaths (or grave promises) sworn on the name of a high power or authority, and ultimately, God's supreme name (for a Biblical example, see Exodus 22:11,12). This is not exactly forbidden, but the command tells people not to do it lightly, or *'for no good reason'* (20:7). For us, this means we should not use the name of God or Jesus casually or as a swear word, or even an expression of surprise. This would be to treat God with disrespect.

The fourth commandment sounds plain; *'keep the Sabbath day and keep it holy'* (20:8), but the Sabbath was a very different matter in ancient times than it has become today, and we must know the difference. Then, the routines of life primarily involved preparing food and caring for animals. This is why verse 10 describes the consequences of the Sabbath for work, for servants, for animals, and also for 'strangers' (foreigners who were slaves or servants). Obviously, the Sabbath command meant standing back from everything except the barest of necessities and animal care, but far more than this, it placed everyone on the same level. We must remember that the Sabbath command requires us to *'keep it holy ...'*; in other words, all God's people, whoever they are, should respect the holiness of God.

The fifth commandment is brief, but poignant. There is no Hebrew word for 'parent', only 'fathers' and 'mothers', and this is one of only a few places in Scripture where both fathers and mothers are mentioned together. The commandment requires God's people to 'honour' fathers and mothers, but it does not determine how this should be done; it implies that His people have a loving attitude of heart towards parents. All other aspects of family relationship flow from this.

In ancient times as well as today, some did not know who their parents were, and some had good reason to be angry with their parents. The Bible has plenty to say elsewhere about how to deal with the difficult circumstances of life, but it does not stand back from calling people to have a right attitude with each other in the family; this is one of the keys to social stability. Of course, the relationship between parent and child is different according to age, but the word 'honour' seems to reflect the relationship between an adult and aging parents. The command adds a promise, saying that when people keep this command, their days will be *'long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.'* (20:12).

In the Gospels, Jesus spoke about all of the issues raised in all these commandments (see Matt 5:33-37, 12:7-12, 15:4-8), so they are all very important. His words help us understand that the commands are not to be laid aside as superseded Old Testament laws. They are of basic importance to us now.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Swearing – the meaning of using the Lord's name (20:7)
- The Sabbath – what it means to be obedient to God (20:8-11)
- Honouring parents – and the meaning of living long in the land (20:12).
- Jesus and the third, fourth and fifth commands

## Notes on the text and translation

**V7** *'you shall not make use of the name of the Lord your God for no good reason'* This commandment is the subject of some dispute, and this can be seen by the different ways in which it is translated; for example, *'you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God,'* (NRSV). The Hebrew says, literally, *'you shall not raise up the name of the Lord your God for no good,'* and I

have kept as close to this as possible. The meaning of the words 'take/use' and 'vain' are key to this issue and are discussed in the study.

**V10 'or the stranger living within your gates'** There are two words of interest here. Firstly, the word 'stranger', which is the Hebrew word for a foreign guest residing in Israel, sometimes called a 'sojourner' or an 'alien'. Secondly, the expression 'within your gates' is exactly as is suggested by the Hebrew, but many Bible versions replace this with 'in your towns', because this effectively means the same thing.

## Going Deeper

### **Swearing – the meaning of using the Lord's name (20:7)**

The third commandment begs three related questions; How do we take the Lord's name in vain, why is the name important, and what is the punishment? I have already explained the answer to the first question, but is it not best to cut out all forms of swearing, using the Lord's name or not? We can't do this because there is one form of 'swearing' we have not yet properly considered. We see this most clearly in the act of 'swearing in', which is still a part of judicial and legal processes in most countries, and such solemn oaths are an important part of life, whether in legal matters, in marriage, or in any legal contractual matters. In some countries, people still swear before God, with one hand on a Bible, and this is a remnant of Christian tradition in our modern age. The second commandment does not forbid such swearing, rather, it provides the ultimate safeguard. God sees all things and the one who swears on God's name is accountable to God for what he or she says. Those who do not fear God often respect this form of swearing completely, but it is supremely important for those who do.

The next question is this; why is the Lord's name important? Today, we use names casually, but to ancient peoples, the use of a name was more than symbolic. Name, identity and character were perceived to strongly related, and it was common for people to have names with particular meanings related to their lives (see the names of the sons of Jacob –Genesis 30 and 49). For example, to use someone's name as a witness to an agreement, meant invoking that person's authority in the matter. With this background, it is clear that to call on God's name was to make the highest level of commitment possible. Equally, to ignore, 'take in vain', or treat casually such an oath was to turn one's back on the matter, on the others involved, and also on the God who was called upon to witness the agreement. Such action was serious indeed!

The misuse of God's name was consequently an abuse of God Himself, as the third commandment says, and it concludes with a threat of punishment, '*for the Lord will not hold innocent anyone who uses His name in vain*' (20:7). No specific punishment mentioned here, but as we continue to read Exodus, we will find that the law mentions many punishments given to those who disregard God's moral and social law. This commandment is like a general threat, which consequently points to what comes next in Exodus.

### **The Sabbath – what it means to be obedient to God (20:8-11)**

The fourth commandment starts simply, but is expanded to form the longest of the Ten Commandments. Did it once exist in a simple, positive form; '*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*' (20:8), or in the negative form implied in verse 10, '*On the Sabbath ... you shall do no work*'? The other interesting fact is that here in Exodus, the command is closely linked with God's act of rest after creation (20:10 – Genesis 2:1-3). Now, the other record of the Ten Commandments omits this connection (see Deuteronomy 5:12), and suggests that the reason for the Sabbath is quite different. There, the Sabbath is to remind Israel of her rest after slavery in Egypt! The wording of the whole text of the Ten Commandments is virtually the same in Exodus and Deuteronomy, except for this one important detail!

If there was confusion about the reasons for the Sabbath in ancient times, then there certainly is today! Most Christian people think of the Sabbath as the day upon which people worship God, and not all Christians associate this with rest, except as an ideal. Clearly, the Sabbath began exclusively as a principle of rest honouring God, as is clear in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, and gradually, worship was accepted as an appropriate way to honour the holiness of God. Later on in Scripture, Exodus 31:13,17 indicates that the Sabbath was regarded as a 'sign' of God's Covenant relationship with Israel and therefore a subject of praise. Then, the ritual laws indicate that Israel's main festivals and worship events (see Lev 23:3f.), normally begin or end with a Sabbath celebration, and normal work and food preparation was banned. There are occasional references to the Sabbath elsewhere (e.g. 2 Kings 4:23, Isaiah 56:2f. and Amos 8:5) but little else.

After the Exile, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, Israelite communities around the world had to find patterns of worship appropriate to their new circumstances. The Babylonians regarded rest on the seventh day as a 'curse' against work, but the Israelite communities there responded to this by worshipping God on the Sabbath in prayer, and recalling their history by reading their Scriptures. This is a great example

of how a negative feature of the pagan world was turned around by God's people by means of the revelation of the One true God.

Whatever else we say about the Sabbath, this law allowed people to gain spiritual strength from being close to God and copying what He did, moreover, it applied to everyone, rich and poor alike. It was natural that on a day when all normal work should cease, people began to see the Sabbath as a day for doing God's will rather than doing the normal chores and routines of everyday work.

### ***Honouring parents – and the meaning of living long in the land (20:12).***

The fifth commandment is wholly positive, which is a great blessing, considering the stress and negativity surrounding the issue of handling aging parents today. We live in an age when there is an increasingly aged and medically dependent population, but we can still learn much from Scripture about the dignity of life and the high regard and value we should place on the elderly.

The fifth commandment appeals to adults to respect and honour their parents. It is not a command designed to deal with the relationship of children with their parents; this is the subject, for example, of Paul's writing ('*children, obey your parents*' – Col 3:20). The word used here is 'honour', not 'obey', so it is entirely inappropriate for elderly people to argue that Scripture gives them the right to demand attention and care from their offspring, as if demanding attention by means of emotional blackmail. As we saw above, the point of the command is to identify love and compassion as the basis for family relationships.

We live at a time of considerable decay within the structures of family life in many western countries, alongside much emphasis on the empowerment of youth. Young people need to be empowered, and Scripture has some suggestions about this (e.g. see 1 Tim 2:22). However, to do this at the expense of the elderly, or to fail to allow the elderly to make their proper contribution to the mentoring and growth of the young would be ill considered. The Ten Commandments, together with all Scripture, offers us a picture of a social order under God in which all people have their place, and in this, the elderly are honoured, and this gives long term stability to society (20:12). God's promise here does not equate honouring the aged with having long life; here, God promises a blessing to His people in days long before there was any concept of life after death or resurrection.

The history of Israel and Judah as told in 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles indicates that although the people of Israel did live 'long in the land', the honouring of the elderly was never given priority by God's people (see Absalom's dethronement of his father King David, in 2 Samuel 15, also Isaiah 3:5, Jer. 3:24f.). The fifth commandment says that the esteem and care of the elderly brings God's blessing, and some may feel that this is a commandment that, too easily, we fail to keep.

### ***Jesus and the third, fourth and fifth commands***

It is interesting that Jesus comments on all the Ten Commandments at some point in His ministry. It goes without saying that Jesus upheld in His teaching and example the first and the second Commandments (described yesterday). Here, we will not spend long over this subject, except to point out the feature of what He says about commandments 3,4 and 5.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read,

*you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)*

In this teaching, we can see that Jesus is aware of the issues surrounding oaths that lie behind the third commandment. However, consistently with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches a higher ethical standard of direct and absolute truth, and plain speaking. This remains a challenge to us all today. A little later in his ministry, Jesus was challenged about the Sabbath, and said these words:

*"The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." Now He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:7-12)*

Here, Jesus spoke to a situation not unlike today, where people had long since forgotten the egalitarian and restful and 'saving' principles upon which the Sabbath was built. Jesus' teaching appeared to the rabbis to be scandalously deviant of the Law, but there is little in His teaching that can possibly be said to contravene

the fourth of the Ten Commandments! Towards the end of His ministry, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their hypocrisies in these words:

*For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.' (Matthew 15:4-8)*

Again, Jesus has a keen eye for God's moral law and the way in which people manage to bend their way around it for their own ends. The situation Jesus describes is indeed socially complex (see my notes on Matthew 15), but he would not tolerate a situation in which elderly parents went uncared for, especially in the name of God!

## Application

There is so much for us to consider as a result of looking at any of the Ten Commandments, it is almost impossible to offer adequate thoughts on the 'application' for the third, fourth and fifth commandments, because there is so much to say! The ban on using the Lord's name for swearing oaths is clearly clarified by Jesus, with the result that we would be unwise to allow ourselves to become entangled in using the Lord's name in any dishonourable way. Many people have a difficulty with swearing, and they find it almost impossible to stop the habits of a lifetime. Jesus can set us free from such bondage, especially if we accept the true nature of our sin and repent. Some feel condemned if they cannot rise above such problems straight away, but it is best if we accept that these things will sometimes take time. We can then concentrate on the first important step of making sure that when we offend, we are sincere in our repentance.

As far as the Sabbath goes, the church should surely remember that the Sabbath is Saturday and not Sunday. Two thousand years ago, the Christian Church chose the first day of the week to worship the risen Lord on the day of His resurrection, the first day of the week! The fact that we now call Sunday the Sabbath causes us enormous confusion, and few people who attend church understand either the real reason for the Sabbath, which is rest, or the difference between this and the day on which we choose to worship God! Nevertheless, it is surely right to both honour God and witness to society that one day a week should be a day of rest. Then, we need to find ways of enabling ourselves to honour Him with genuine rest for 24 hours each week, otherwise our testimony to the world may well be misunderstood!

The fifth commandment presents us all with a powerful moral and practical challenge. How can we honour the elderly within society today, and maintain the cohesion necessary for growth driven largely by youth? According to the commandments of God, the answer to our problem may lie within it; the elderly need the young, and the young do in fact need the elderly. Surely, it is the job of the church to model this integration, instead of moving towards allowing different age groups to form different worshipping communities, as happens all too often today. Whilst I understand the need for people to worship God in ways that are appropriate to their age related culture and need, all God's people need each other, and if we do not understand this, then we do not understand our God or His commands.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. How can the church today meet the challenge of the third commandment, and cease taking the Lord's name in vain?
2. How can the church today meet the challenge of the fourth commandment, and promote a helpful Biblical understanding of the Sabbath?
3. How can the church today meet the challenge of the fifth commandment, and honour the young and the old together?

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *Respect for God*
- *Respect for God's Sabbath*
- *Respect for parents*

## **Personal comments by author**

*The third, fourth and fifth commandments are deeply challenging. They touch on a range of issues that are close to the heart of the life of the church today; how we witness in society, what we mean by worship and the Sabbath, and the young and the old in church. I do not believe I have answers here, but it is better to start to deal with these problems from Scripture rather than personalities and opinions within the church. Let us study God's Word first, and let Him speak to us.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *I suggest that you have a good look at this passage, and consider whether one of these commandments has something important for you to consider personally. Take that one commandment and prayerfully offer it to God, and pray about it each day as you seek to honour its challenge.*
- *Pray for the church as it seeks to enable people to witness to the world, worship God appropriately, and overcome the barriers between the young and the old.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Thank You, Almighty God, for guiding Your people of old. May we learn from their experience that You have a plan and a purpose for Your people and Your world, and help us to understand that the guidance You have given in the past is available to us now, through Jesus Christ: AMEN

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